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## *Aloof Poindexter Still Contends That History Will Vindicate Him*

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Last Tuesday morning at about 7:30 White House national security adviser John M. Poindexter was picking over his breakfast in his West Wing office when he suddenly mentioned to an aide, "I'll be telling the president . . . requesting reassignment in the Navy."

There were no jitters, no real emotion. The vice admiral's face was stony as he blinked behind his glasses and returned to his in-box, still stuffed with the endless flow of national security paper.

Poindexter has always sought to be prepared for every turn of fate. "Of all the people in the world who might have to take a fall," the aide later said, "the admiral was probably the most qualified in history."

Poindexter, who at 51 was one of the most powerful career officers in naval history, has turned inward in these days after his fall, according to several of those who thought they were closest to this most distant of men.

"He thinks history will vindicate him," one aide said, "that the Iran opening was well-intended, well-thought out . . . There's two years of paper over here that will show it was not a policy wrapped around an attempt to get hostages out."

Senior administration and Cabinet officers have spoken privately with extreme derision of Poindexter as a man who never mastered his assignment, isolated himself and never displayed any political understanding while holding one of the most politically sensitive posts in government.

Said a ranking administration figure close to the president, "John Poindexter turned in one of the most miserable performances in decades."

But Poindexter is so confident of his position that two sources said that as of Friday he had not sought an attorney.

They said the admiral thinks that it probably was not illegal when funds from the Iran arms sales were diverted to aid the counterrevolutionaries fighting the Nicaraguan government. Marine Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, the Poindexter aide fired last week when Poindexter's resignation was announced by the president, also "did not treat the contra spinoff as illegal," according to one informed source.

But a thousand questions remain about Poindexter, his actions, his timing, and who he told, what he told, when he told—if he told. Poindexter will be one of the most sought-after witnesses, as the Justice Department criminal investigation and related probes by Congress get under way—with investigators looking at potential violations of U.S. export laws and of congressional prohibitions on providing military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

One source close to Poindexter

said the admiral will cooperate with all appropriate investigations. Referring to news accounts of possible document-shredding in the last week by Poindexter and North, the source said any such shredding was routine.

Several of those closest to the admiral said that not only is Poindexter a private man, but that he ran an intensely private shop in the West Wing.

"Need-to-know was second nature with him," one official said. Another called him "the covert mag."

Poindexter learned about the contra connection to the Iranian arms sales from North, according to sources, when North said, "Admiral, you'll be happy to hear that one spinoff . . ." That reference, the sources said, was to the \$10 million

to \$30 million that Attorney General Edwin Meese III said was deposited in Swiss bank accounts to aid the Nicaraguan rebels.

Poindexter never sought a legal opinion about this "spinoff," which has become the core of the controversy, according to one source. A number of sources maintain that Poindexter did not share the information with his closest National Security Council aides, and after the public disclosure on Tuesday, Poindexter did not treat it as a big secret.

"It was not treated as that ultra-sensitive, not like arms control matters and really sensitive intelligence covert operations," said one source who talked with Poindexter after Tuesday.

Yet sources said that Poindexter ran the NSC operation in considerable secrecy, keeping himself at the center with many private spokes radiating out. There were matters not known by his two key assistants who occupied the two closet-like offices in the security adviser's warren in the West Wing.

Four channels were important and generally not known to others on the NSC staff, the sources said. They were:

- The paper flow of "eyes only" messages or documents that came to Poindexter in sealed envelopes; also messengers occasionally delivered intelligence and other reports to him.

■ Face-to-face, closed-door meetings with key aides or other senior government officials in Poindexter's office. One source said that North had such sessions with Poindexter, but no more frequently than some other senior NSC aides.

■ The relationship with White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan that included periodic one-on-one briefings, usual weekly breakfasts between the two men

generally at the end of the work week, and the so-called "9:30 time" when Poindexter briefed the president in the morning with Regan frequently attending.

■ The direct access to the president which included one-on-one meetings on rare occasions and a direct phone line to the Oval Office that was used regularly. One source said the Poindexter also frequently sent memos, intelligence reports or cables to the president.

Half a dozen sources and officials who worked closely with Poindexter during his 50-week tenure as security adviser agreed that it was pretty much a guessing game for anyone to figure out what Poindexter did or did not pass along to Regan and to the president.

These sources said that Poindexter has not given any clue to what he may or may not have said to Reagan and Regan.

Poindexter, according to one source, considered Regan the person who provided order to the president's day and not someone to inform about every detail of national security policy. This source with firsthand knowledge of the workings of the White House in the last year said he was suspicious of reports claiming that North informed Regan of the contra connection.

"Ollie just wasn't with Regan very often," this source said.

Another more senior White House official who nevertheless was less informed about the daily information flow, said Regan was keenly attuned to the president's near-obsession with the contra cause and that the chief of staff accordingly made sure he kept himself informed about the matter. Regan, this source said, was aware that North had more information about the contras than anyone else in the U.S. government.

Other sources said Poindexter

realized that the president did not want many details about policy unless the president was preparing for a speech or news conference.

In his five years at the NSC, as military assistant, deputy security adviser and then as security adviser, Poindexter was the chief force in establishing an orderly system of national security decision-making.

Formal presidential decisions were codified in National Security Decision Directives. "We even had an NSDD on Malta," one source said last week, and another joked that Poindexter "probably had an NSDD on when to use the john."

In fact, sources said that in June 1985 a draft NSDD was circulated to the departments and agencies on Iran, but it was impossible to develop a consensus.

"State and Defense objected," one source said. "It was all too sensitive, and it seemed logical to go covert."

United States involvement in arms to Iran was handled through

Israeli transfers, beginning in September 1985. But the covert presidential authority for direct U.S. arms sales to Iran was not obtained until Jan. 17 of this year when the president signed an intelligence "finding" or order.

When the arms sales and transfers became public this month, Poindexter publicly and privately emphasized the role of the Central Intelligence Agency, and sources said that he has claimed he cannot reconstruct all that happened from his memory and files.

"These things were done mostly up the river," said one source familiar with Poindexter's thinking. The reference is to the CIA, which has its headquarters in Langley, up the Potomac River from Washington.

Sources said that Poindexter thinks that CIA Director William J. Casey, several key CIA operations officers and CIA lawyers have most of the answers on the Iranian arms sales this year.

Intelligence sources, however, emphasize the role of the NSC and Poindexter as the operational arms for all the transactions, and said that the contacts with Iranian moderates were handled by the NSC without intermediaries.

Poindexter managed to remain relatively anonymous in the White House until this fall when it was disclosed that he had authored a memo to the president proposing a "disinformation program" to make Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi

think that he was about to be attacked again by the United States or overthrown by key trusted aides.

All along Poindexter has said that he did not intend this disinformation for the American news media and when it did appear there he wanted to distance himself and the White House from any responsibility.

Last week one of his senior assistants said, "John does see the difference between intent and consequence at times . . . . Disinformation was meant for Gadhafi, not [the news media], arms for Iran were meant for good purposes, not to cause a scandal or get money for the contras. . . .

"But sometimes you don't get what you intended, and that's perhaps the John Poindexter story."

Whatever Poindexter's aspirations to be a conceptualizer or organizer of foreign policy, even those friendly toward him say he failed. Not only is the U.S. policy toward Iran in shambles, but Poindexter's critics and friends seem to agree that some of the major policies have come out confused, if not also in shambles. They cite the Middle East, arms control, South Africa and U.S.-Soviet relations.

Poindexter was largely a military planner. Any alleged administration "successes" he is identified with involve military action, such as the 1983 Grenada invasion, the 1985 interception of the four hijackers of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro and the U.S. bombing raid on Libya last April.

Poindexter used to take Sunday mornings off, about the only time he allowed himself away from his office and in-box. But two weeks ago he did not get that, sources said, because he was waiting for one of a series of interviews to explain and attempt to put out the firestorm that had erupted over the sales.

He was asked about his 28 years as a naval officer and his time as commanding officer of a destroyer in the mid-1970s.

"Naval officers," he said, gently extracting his pipe from his jacket pocket, "are better equipped because of command at sea. You have to make decisions; you learn there is nobody else out there in a pinch.

"You learn to be cool," he added, smiling, "whether on the bridge of a destroyer or here. They're the same."